

An Honest Kind of Music



Belle Grooves

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By Belle Grooves



For the remarkable lady who taught me to play and love piano.

This is a story about an orphanage and the orphanage's keeper. It's also a story about the orphans who reside in the orphanage. A story about the five children and the adult. A story about Ian Hain and Mr. JC. Of course, the other children were important too... ish. And the piano. The beautifully clear grand piano that no one except Ian ever touched. The piano that seemed to be the only happy thing in the small, dismal orphanage. Indeed, this is a story about all these things, but also so much more. More than Ian or you or I might ever fathom.

Funnily enough, our story begins with young Ian playing that comely grand piano. The other children -Gracie, Vivi, William, and Edward- sat contentedly around the piano and listened to the slow, lilting music. Ian's favorite songs were slowly dramatic and effortlessly beautiful. He didn't sing. He didn't even read the notes. He simply played and it was elegantly flawless.

Ian Hain played for hours each day, as it was honestly the only thing he could do to distract himself from, well, his own plaguing thoughts. You see, Gracie's parents were too poor to care for her. Vivi's parents died of cancer. William's parents were, again, too poor. Edward's parents died from cancer like Vivi's parents because they were siblings and, in fact, had the same mother and father. But Ian had seen his parents die. He had been there in the car, on the way home. He'd heard the deafening crash and the shattering glass. He remembered the police cars and the ambulances. He recalled being taken to the hospital. Ian remembered when the doctors had come to him and explained that his mother and father hadn't made it. He remembered Mr. JC lifting him into the car and driving him to the small orphanage. The other children were already there. But for a very long time he had not spoken to anyone. It wasn't until he discovered the beauty of the piano that he began to heal. That had been seven years ago, when he was six.

It was the applause that distracted Ian from his thoughts and his music. He hadn't realized that everyone was gathered behind him, clapping. He had not even realized that he'd finished a song. Ian gently closed the piano and turned to the others, but before he could say anything, Mr. JC walked into the room and called him. Ian obediently went with him to one of the four rooms in the orphanage. The room they were in now was Mr. JC's office and bedroom. A bed

was tucked into the corner. A lamp was perched on the dark wooden desk. A large bookshelf filled with books leaned against the wall proudly. The room was small, but it sufficed for Mr. JC's needs.

Ian sat in the same comfortable chair he'd been sitting in at the same time every day for seven years. Mr. JC wasn't just the headmaster of the orphanage. He was a doctor, a chef, a musician, a professor, an author of several novels, a therapist, a former police officer, and he could speak German, French, Spanish, Russian, Greek, and Latin, amongst English. He'd probably done a lot of other things as well, but I'd need an entire five pages to name them all. Of course, he wasn't employed in all those jobs right now. They were past careers that he had mastered before having the orphanage built. All he did now was stay with the children and provide for them and protect them. Mr. JC never asked for anything or raised his voice or seemed angry or even got paid for keeping the children. He was simply there for the children's sake.

Ian now glanced up at him and sighed. "The dream keeps coming back. Sometimes it happens during the day. Sometimes it's when I'm meant to be doing school. Sometimes it keeps going, as though it's been put on loop." He fell silent. Ian never cried during these sessions, though sometimes he came very near despair. Even when he'd been six, he had not shed a tear. Mr. JC wanted him to cry because then Ian would accept what had happened and he would heal, but still the boy hadn't let a single drop fall.

"And what have you done to prevent the dream?" Mr. JC asked, but not in an inquisitory tone. It was in the same tone he might use if he were asking a neighbor if he could borrow their hammer. Kind and unaccusatory.

"The same thing I've been telling you for years, sir. When the dream wakes me, I stay awake." He paused for a moment. "But it still doesn't leave me be."

"Ian, keeping yourself awake is not an ideal way to prevent the dream. Aren't you tired all the time?"

"No, sir. I sometimes sleep for hours by the piano, and whenever I do, the dream doesn't come."

"Why do you enjoy piano so much?"

The flicker of a smile appeared on Ian's face. "My mother taught me to play. I can read notes, but she used to say that the most

beautiful music is inside me. And then she left," That was another thing. Ian *never* used the word died. "And the piano is all I have. Father used to sit in the chair and listen to me play. Sometimes he sang with Mother. The last song they sang together was called *Draw Me Close*."

"What's it about?"

"It's about being close to Jesus."

Mr. JC smiled. "And what do you think of Jesus?"

"I believe in Him, if that's what you mean."

"Ian, I know I always ask this, but why don't you cry? Why do you suppress the emotion? Did something happen to make it where you couldn't cry?"

Ian looked away. "And I've given you the same three words in answer to those questions as long as we've been doing this. I don't know."

"Yes, I know. I've listened to those three words for a long time now. The way you say them. The way you turn away when I ask the questions. Ian, you aren't being honest with me. Look at me and tell me the truth." His voice was not at all commanding, but rather quiet and calming. Forgiving, one might say.

Ian met Mr. JC's gaze. "I can't tell you the truth, sir."

"Why not?"

"I've never told anyone the truth because it scares me."

"Deceiving yourself is not the answer. Tell me."

Ian shifted in his seat, suddenly uncomfortable. "I don't want to," he whispered.

"What if it helps you? What if it means you'll heal? We'll never have to do this again. Is telling me worth all that?" Ian nodded slowly; thoughtfully. "Then give me the truth and you can leave."

"The truth?"

"Yes, Ian."

Ian's gray eyes grew suddenly quite sad and distressed, but not teary. His voice was quiet when he answered, as though he was afraid of being overheard. "I don't cry because I'm afraid if I do, I'll never be able to pull myself from the despair. If I allow one tear to fall, then all the others will come cascading down and I'll lose myself in them. Sir, if I cry, I'm afraid I'll never be able to stop."

"You play the piano to stop yourself from crying? To stop

yourself from forgetting your parents? You play for consolation?"

"Yes, Mr. JC, I do. That is the honest truth."

Amazingly, unbelievably, Mr. JC smiled. "Will you play a song for me?"

"But, sir, you hear me play every day," Ian replied.

"Yes, but I haven't heard you play *Draw Me Close*."

Ian shook his head. "I can't play that."

"But you played it for your parents."

"Yes, and I will never play it again."

"Ian, what do you think will happen?" Before Ian could answer, Mr. JC raised his hand. "And don't tell me you don't know. From now on, we must only give each other the absolute truth. Understood?"

"Okay, but it's stupid."

"I don't believe that for a second."

"I won't ever play it again because they died that same day. If I play it again, someone else might die."

Mr. JC, still smiling, stood and opened the door. "No, Ian. No one's going to die. Come and play it for me, please."

Ian stood and walked into the main room. This was where the transparent grand piano took up most of the space, and where the children slept cuddled in blankets on the floor. It was where the majority of the orphans' time was spent. And it was where Ian took his seat on the piano bench and took a deep breath. It was where the other children waited expectantly and where Mr. JC's smile grew happier, if such a thing was possible. This was where Ian's hands began to play a song which his parents had once loved.

"Draw me close to you,

Never let me go.

I lay it all down again,

To hear you say that I'm your friend.

You are my desire,

No one else will do.

Cause nothing else can take your place,

To feel the warmth of your embrace.

Help me find the way, bring me back to you!

You're all I want.

You're all I've ever needed.

You're all I want.

Help me know you are near.
Help me know you are near."

Ian finished the song and heard the other children clap. He'd heard Mr. JC sing the words. He was suddenly with his parents again, six years old. His father was singing loudly and his mother softly. Both of them were smiling and laughing, and Ian was happy too. And then the song was over, and the memory faded, and he was left in the orphanage. He was left to sit on the piano bench.

When Ian felt a hand on his shoulder, he startled. Mr. JC was smiling down at him. Mr. JC was always smiling, always young despite his bright white hair. He never seemed to age. As long as Ian had been in the orphanage, he'd always been the same light-hearted and joyful man that he is now. Always.

"Well done, Ian. Well done." he beamed.

Ian did not smile. "Thank you, sir." He bit his lip. "But..."

Mr. JC sat beside the boy. "Yes?"

"I'm never playing it again. It reminded me why I hadn't played it. It's because I can't. I can't, sir." Tears sparkled in his eyes for the second time since he'd been brought to the orphanage. But they didn't spill. He didn't cry.

"Ian, it's all right. You don't have to play it ever again."

Ian nodded and watched the headmaster shut his office door. He watched the other children cuddle in their blankets and drift off. He slid off the piano bench and wrapped his own blanket around himself beside the other children.

"Ian?"

It was Gracie's voice. Her blond hair was always pulled in two loose braids. Her icy blue eyes always looked content. She was the oldest of all the children at fourteen. And her smile came with such ease, Ian sometimes wished he could smile so simply.

"Yes?"

She smiled. "How was it with Mr. JC?"

"Good, I guess. It seemed the same as always."

"Have you still not cried?"

"I haven't, no."

"Do you think you ever will?"

"I don't know. I was very near tears today when Mr. JC sang that song." Ian replied.

Gracie pushed herself up on an elbow, her smile vanishing. "Why?"

For a time, Ian didn't respond. He only looked at her with a thoughtful expression. And then he answered in a quiet voice. "That song was the last song I played for Mother and Father before they were gone."

"Before they died, you mean?"

Ian winced at the word. "I mean what I say, Gracie."

Her eyes grew wide, and her hand flew to her mouth. "Ian, I apologize. I forgot."

"It's okay." He rolled over and sighed. "Goodnight, Gracie."

"Goodnight, Ian."

It took Ian Hain a rather long time to fall asleep, as it did most nights. He didn't want to see the dream again. He didn't want to revisit that horrible night. He hated the hospital and the cars and everything about that night. It was horrible. It was plaguing. And it haunted him every night.

When morning came, the children all went to the kitchen and dining room to eat breakfast. It was always the same. Oatmeal. They didn't complain. They talked and laughed and then went about doing their own things. Vivi and Edward read books together. William ran around and played games with himself. And Gracie leaned against the piano and listened to Ian's enchanting music. Today there was something different, though. Of course, all his music was sad and dramatic and lilting, but today it sounded... lost. It sounded like Ian didn't want to be playing the piano and the sound that resulted was unfocused and confused. It wasn't unpleasant to hear, but it was different.

Perhaps it could be explained because Vivi and her brother were leaving today. Mr. JC had found someone to take them, someone he very much believed was perfect for the siblings. Perhaps the distraught music could be explained by the tiredness in Ian's eyes. Or perhaps it was only because something was bothering him. The question then becomes, what?

Gracie waited for his song to end before she asked, "Ian, what's wrong?"

He opened his eyes and looked up at her. "Nothing. I'm okay."

"That's not true."

"Really, Gracie. I'm fine."

"Ian!" Mr. JC called.

He smiled triumphantly at Gracie and left her by the piano. Ian took his seat after he'd shut the door. Mr. JC seemed, to the boy, worried about something. Distressed.

"Sir? Is something the matter?" Ian asked.

The headmaster smiled his signature smile. "Of course not." He ran a hand through his hair. "Now tell me, Ian. What was going on out there?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your music."

"I don't kn—" he stopped himself and sighed. "My hands are shaky. My thoughts are on other things. I can't get that song out of my head. And whenever I think of the song, I think of my parents. And then I inevitably go back to the accident. Before, I could always focus on the piano alone. But today... today something is wrong. Something changed."

"What changed, Ian?"

"I do—" he cleared his throat. "I think I did."

Mr. JC raised a brow. "Do you really believe that?"

"No, but I didn't want to say that I didn't know."

"I think you have a lot on your mind. Vivi and Edward will be leaving today, and there's something I've not told you. I know you and Gracie are close. I didn't want to upset you anymore than you always are. Gracie is leaving too, Ian."

Ian's eyes grew big. He hardly dared ask, but he had to know. "When?"

"Today. You might like to know that she's not going until the evening." Mr. JC looked at the boy sitting before him. "Ian?"

"You... you did this on purpose. You want me to cry." Ian breathed.

"Ian, I did no such thing. I knew you'd react this way. I'm sure you can understand."

"No. I understand that you'll do anything to make me cry. You've been waiting for seven years and still there's nothing. I will have no part in your scheme. I'm not coming back to this room. I hate this room and this orphanage! I hate you, Mr. JC!"

Ian stood up and yanked the door open, slamming it shut on his

way out. Vivi and Edward looked up from their book and stared at Ian. William stopped running around and watched Ian sit on the piano bench. Gracie sat beside him, but he didn't notice her until she spoke softly.

"I'm sorry, Ian. I should've told you."

"No. It's his fault. Everything is his fault. I hate this place!"

"You don't mean that, Ian. It's his duty to give us families."

"Maybe so, but it's not his duty to ruin my life."

Gracie sighed and let Ian be. He sat there alone for a time after she left with his fingers resting on the piano keys. He pressed down one key and played something he had never played before. He didn't know it then, but Ian Hain would become famous for this very song thanks to Mr. JC. It had words. He didn't much like singing, but this song called for the extra noise. Ian sang quietly, but Gracie and William and Vivi and Edward and even Mr. JC stood silently behind him while he sang and played. It was sad and tearful, but it was beautiful and perfect, nonetheless.

"They say there is a reason,
They tell me time will heal.
But neither time nor reason,
Will change the way I feel.
For on one knows the heartache,
That lay behind my smile.
No one knows how many times,
I've nearly broken down and cried.
I want to tell you something,
So there won't be any doubt.
You're both wonderful to think of,
But so hard to be without."

Ian's fingers stopped playing, but his eyes remained closed. He didn't shed any tears, but Gracie cried. She wrapped her arms around him and cried onto his shoulder. William stood with an open mouth, Edward's book fell to the floor, and Vivi wiped away a stray tear. She embraced Ian with Gracie. Mr. JC went back into his office and closed the door, a bright smile on his face.

Ian waited until the girls pulled away to continue playing. He didn't sing again; he only played the effortless and elegant songs that he always played. The songs which his mother had taught him. The

songs that now cleared his mind of all the worries and sadness and left in their place a peace and a calmness. His lips moved to keep count, his fingers pressed the keys, his eyes stayed closed, and his body swayed gently with the music. Ian was no ordinary pianist. He was a prodigy, though he didn't know it. He wouldn't know it until the end of this story. He wouldn't know it for a very long time.

"Vivi! Edward!"

A handsome lady with dark skin came into the main room with bright eyes and smiling lips. She was slender and wore an extravagant black dress. There were sequins and sparkles and jewels all across the shimmering material. Her hair was smooth and black and long and fell in waves down her back. She seemed kind enough and glad enough to have children of her own.

"Goodbye, William and Gracie. Bye, Ian!" Vivi said.

"Bye! We'll miss you!"

Mr. JC embraced the siblings and smiled at them. "I'll see you again sometime."

"Thank you, sir." Vivi hugged him again and left with her brother and her new mother. They would grow up happily together and attain a pet dog. Edward would become a teacher and Vivi a ballerina. Their mother and father would love them and live to see many grandchildren. They would never see the orphanage again and they would be happy.

During all of this, Ian continued to play. His songs grew quieter and slower as the day progressed. He stopped, of course, for lunch and not again after that. He didn't speak to Gracie or apologize to Mr. JC. Ian's fingers only began to ache when the sun had begun to set. When he heard the creaky wooden door open to allow two people inside. When he heard Mr. JC exit his office and greet the visitors, that's when his fingers ached, and he stopped. That was when he slammed the piano lid shut and stood beside Gracie.

"I'm so glad you were able to make it, Marie. And you, Martin." Mr. JC exclaimed. "It's wonderful to meet you both. I'm sure Gracie will think just the same."

"Thank you, JC. We appreciate it." Martin answered.

Gracie grinned. "It's wonderful to see you both." She glanced at Ian. "But, if you'll excuse me, I need to say goodbye to my friends."

The three adults smiled and let the children go. Gracie pulled Ian

to the far wall where William was standing. Nobody spoke. William stared at his shoes. Ian found interest in the ceiling. And then Gracie burst into tears.

"I'll miss you both!" she cried, embracing the boys. "Goodbye."

William pulled away first and went into the kitchen. He never spoke. Ian couldn't recall a time when William had spoken to him. He didn't even know what the boy's voice sounded like.

"Ian, please. Look at me." He met her eyes. "You must promise you'll try. Don't give up. Don't forget me. Ian, promise you won't let this get to you. Please."

Ian nodded. "I promise, Gracie. Goodbye."

She lightly kissed his cheek. "Goodbye, Ian."

Marie and Martin led her out the doors and into the night. Mr. JC closed the doors and told the boys to get some rest. William was immediately asleep, every inch of him covered except the wild brown hair. Ian slumped on the piano bench and sighed heavily. Seven years getting to know Gracie, and now she was simply gone. Seven years of her listening to his songs, and now there was no one. Seven years with someone who knew everything about him, and now there was only himself. Seven years of trying to escape, and now he was back where he'd begun.

He played a very slow and quiet song, allowing himself to relax. His fingers were tired after all his playing, but they decided not to make any mistakes. Ian rarely made mistakes. He rarely opened his eyes. He rarely felt so lonely.

Mr. JC knew how Ian felt, of course, because Mr. JC knew everything. He knew Ian was playing the piano. He knew the boy would fall asleep slumped against his piano. He knew what would happen when William left. He knew it would be sad and it would break his heart, but he knew it all the same. Mr. JC knew when Ian would at last cry. And he knew that when the child finally did cry, he would be healed. He would be better. He would be still.

Ian Hain spoke little, almost as little as William, and played song after song after song. William faded into the background, Mr. JC's sessions seemed like an alternate reality, and the music was everywhere. Ian's eyes were seldom open, and when they were, they were very near a great sadness. Very near the tearful stillness. When he wasn't playing, he was talking to Mr. JC. They spoke about Gracie,

and they spoke about music, and they spoke about Ian's mother and father. But it was the headmaster who did most of the speaking. It was Mr. JC who grew increasingly worried about the boy.

Ian didn't talk to William or interact with anything but the piano. His fingers pressed the keys harder than before, and his eyes were squeezed shut. His body didn't sway, it stayed rigid and tense. His fingers that once were still and elegant became trembly and unprecise. Ian's world was split between music and sessions. Sound and voices. Talking and playing. Noise and more noise.

Now Ian sat in the warm and inviting office of Mr. JC who was, as always, smiling. Ian hadn't smiled since the day Gracie had left, and that was a week ago. He only played and ate and slept and did whatever it was he was doing now.

"You play more aggressively than before, Ian. Why is that?"

"I don't know."

"Perhaps you know, then, something you want to tell me?"

"I've nothing to say."

Then, for the first time since Ian had known the man, Mr. JC frowned and sighed and dropped his head in his hands. "Ian, please. You must let me help you. This will only work if you are honest with me and if you try. You must do your part. Before she left, you were really doing very well. Before she left, you were very nearly healed. Before she left, Ian, you had begun to accept things as they are. You must try to achieve that again. Please."

Ian turned to Mr. JC and took a deep breath. "There is something I must say, sir. Something I really want to tell you." he sighed. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean those things I said. I don't hate you. I don't hate this place. I just feel enclosed and alone and sad. I don't know what to do except play the piano. I don't know what to do unless my fingers touch the keys. Without the music, I feel suffocated by the silence." Ian exhaled a long breath. "I don't know how to be more like you. I need your help, sir. Please."

"I accept your apology, Ian, and I'll help you because you asked for help. Because you came to me. That is something which you had not done for a very long time." Mr. JC's lips turned up in a small smile. "Now tell me, why do you think your music has changed?"

"Perhaps because Mother told me always to play the music that was inside me. That's the reason, I think, that my songs are the way

they are. It's because the inside of me is fragile and hurt. And when Gracie left, and Vivi and Edward, I felt alone and so my music changed because there was something else inside me."

"If you want me to, I can tell you how to fix that. How to heal."

"I know what you're going to say."

"And I won't say it unless you need to hear it." Mr. JC paused for a moment and studied the boy before him. The dark red hair was messy, and the light gray eyes were tired. His face was pale from lack of sun and his fingers never stopped tapping. Perhaps that was an anxiety thing, but Mr. JC knew otherwise. Ian wasn't anxious. He only tapped because he was always playing the piano. "Ian, if you talk to William, it might also help you."

"William doesn't talk."

"He does if he trusts you."

"But he's... young."

"You're only thirteen. Are you telling me that you're not also young?"

"No, I'm just older than him by five years. That's a lot."

"No, it's not. And he needs someone to talk to. Take a break from piano and go to him. Learn to trust him. It'll help both of you."

Ian closed his eyes for a moment. "I can't just take a break from piano, sir. Then the dream will return. Then it will always be there, in my head. I haven't taken a break from the piano for seven years. I can't."

"Do you know the difference between can't and won't?" Mr. JC asked.

"Yes."

"Go on..."

"In this scenario, won't means that I am choosing not to do it, while can't means I am quite literally incapable of doing it."

"Which means that you won't do it. You can, you're simply choosing not to."

Ian sighed. "What if he never trusts me?"

"Trust is a fragile thing. Easy to break, easy to lose, and very hard to get back. But when people trust you, they begin to know you. They begin to see the sorrow behind your smile. The love behind your anger. The reason behind your silence. Ian, you can only know whether William will trust you if you first trust him."

Ian nodded and left the small office. He walked back to the piano bench, but now there was someone else sitting there. A young boy with light brown hair and bright green eyes. He wasn't smiling, but he did look up at Ian as he sat down.

"Hi, William. I'm meant to become your friend. Mr. JC told me I should trust you. He even said I should take a break from playing piano." Ian smiled. "I haven't taken a break from playing in a very long time. I guess it's the only thing that keeps my mind off things..." He fell silent and stared at the far wall. Now the dream was coming back. With all the sounds and horrors and doctors. All the *things* he wanted to forget.

"What sort of things?" William's voice was quiet and still sounded young. He hadn't looked at the other boy to speak, only stared at the far wall like Ian.

"Things I wish I could forget. I can still hear the sirens and the doctors' voices. They told me everything would be okay. They told me..." Ian sighed. "But it was a lie. It wasn't okay and I'm not sure it ever will be."

"Why not?"

"What?"

"Why are you not sure?"

"Well, because I... I don't know."

William looked at Ian now and offered a small smile. "Mr. JC is here, Ian. Everything is sure." He got up and rolled into his blanket, completely content and apparently entirely sure of everything.

Ian watched the other boy sleep for a time before turning toward the piano. He placed his slender fingers on the ivory keys and readied his foot on the pedal. His eyes closed and his body relaxed. Then his fingers pressed the keys, only it wasn't perfect as always it used to be. It wasn't beautiful and flowing and dramatic and elegant the way it once was. It wasn't lovely and comely and pleasant to listen to forevermore. It wasn't ugly or hideous or repulsive, but it was *not* the beautiful music that Ian had always played. It was disastrous and chaotic and unrhythmic. Ian pulled his hands away from the keys and stared at them, as though blaming them for the monstrosity that he had just composed. Ian shut the piano lid and laid his head in his hands. What was wrong with him to make it so he couldn't play? What had happened to ruin his only form of

comfort? To ruin the wonderful music he had once delighted in creating?

He could hear the songs in his head and see his own fingers performing them, but he couldn't do it. His fingers were against him. They wouldn't press the proper flats or the proper sharps or even, simply, the proper keys. Everything was wrong. Everything was preposterous. Ian was meant to play the piano forever, for endless hours plus a day. He was meant to fill vast rooms with enchanting music and bring gladness into people's hearts. He was meant to play the piano, and now the very idea of playing with perfection was dismantled. His delicate fingers, once obedient and admissive, had now betrayed him and ruined his every song. His own fingers were the enemies. Which meant, plainly, that Ian himself was the enemy of himself.

And what was there to do now except scream and cry and throw himself to the floor? What could he do except acknowledge the defeating realization that he'd lost his beautiful ability to play the piano? What was there to do except stay on the bench with trembling hands and lost thoughts and dismal ideas? Well, Ian Hain did none of those things. He didn't cry or scream or stay on the bench or continue to imagine the perfect songs he no longer could play. Instead, he took a deep breath and knocked heavily on Mr. JC's door. And when the headmaster opened the door, he walked silently and slowly and carefully into the office where so many times he had said nothing but the whole and absolute truth.

"Ian, what's wrong?" Mr. JC asked in that admirable voice of his.

"I can't play, sir. My fingers deny me the beauty of playing the piano."

"Perhaps you ought to play a song you know by heart."

"That isn't the problem. I just... I can't play anymore. And this time, I mean can't in every sense of the word."

"Come with me."

Ian followed Mr. JC to the transparent piano, standing in all its glory and magnificence. The strings and the hammers sitting contentedly in their rightful places. The three pedals always together like the best of friends. The lid which was there simply to prevent its keyboard from crumbling and from choking on dust. And, of course,

we mustn't forget the bench and the comfort it offered for someone of special talent. For someone who wished to press its friend's keys with fondness and affection. These are the true beauties that a piano can bring anyone, whether they listen to or whether they make music.

Ian sat on the bench and made room for Mr. JC to sit beside him. William sat up on his blanket and watched with a tiredly intrigued expression. Then Mr. JC audibly cracked his knuckles and expertly laid his gentle hands on the patient keyboard. When the first note rang through the small orphanage, Ian knew then and there that he would die at the piano if truly hearing its graceful strain could make a man smile. It certainly stole a smile from Ian and even from William. The sound was transfixing, the beauty unearthly superb. Mr. JC played as well as Ian might have only yesterday. He played with simple perfection.

The final chords of the delicate song hung in the air, and then slowly faded. Ian, in that moment just before the song's resolve, respected his guardian more than he had ever respected anyone in all his life.

"If I could play so sublimely, I doubt I'd need to stay here." Ian whispered.

Mr. JC smiled a kind smile at him. "Dear boy, you said you wanted to be more like me. The first step is to trust, to have faith, and to believe. If that applies to the piano, then trust your fingers. Be faithful in the music they make and, simply, have faith. Believe that you can, and you will. Confidence, Ian, is everything."

"And if my fingers no longer have faith in me?"

"Then you do not have faith in yourself."

"And how do I fix that?"

"You play without worry. But, Ian, this isn't about your fingers or your music. It's about you allowing yourself to heal. Because until the day you do, you will never trust yourself or anyone to help you."

Ian lowered his gaze. "I know, sir. But music helps me heal. It—"

Mr. JC's hands fell on Ian's shoulders. "No, it does not. It distracts you from recovery and from the more important things, Ian. Playing is wonderful, and I'm thankful that I'm privileged to hear your music. But there is more to life than playing piano. You must ask for help. You must accept help. You must allow yourself to heal.

When you play the piano, it is only to prevent the disturbing dream. When you play, it is only to protect yourself from the fear and the guilt and the burden and the loneliness and the truth. Ian, you mustn't continue to play these slow and despairing songs. They are beautiful and a work of art, but you are more than that. You must learn to stop playing your conflicting kind of music and play a song worth this piano's time. Play a song that creates joy and attracts happiness. Learn to make music that is honest and exquisite and true."

"How am I to accomplish that?"

"By playing the way you used to, before the accident. Don't play in despair and hopelessness, play with a sense of gladness and optimism." Then he offered a sad smile and turned away and went into his office.

Ian watched the door close silently and turned back to the piano. His fingers were prepared to play, as always they were, but he didn't ask them to press the keys. He only stared at the piano as though his gaze might burn a hole in it. Of course, such a thing could never happen. But if it did, despite the anger toward it that Ian might've felt, he would've cried. If his piano was no longer able to calm his nerves, he would fall apart.

Since his icy stare didn't break the piano into pieces, Ian finally curled into his blanket and forced himself to rest. To forget what had happened today. He forced himself to believe that tomorrow would be different. And indeed it would, though Ian did not yet know the reason why.

Then morning arrived, but Ian didn't play the piano a single time. Instead, he talked to William, although the boy said nothing in response. He sat on the piano bench, felt his fingers ache with the desire to play, but he never once touched the ivory keys. Never touched any part of the piano. He only stared at it and tried to imagine that honest kind of music that Mr. JC had spoken of. He tried to picture himself playing a beautiful song that was happy, but also elegant and slow. But then, when he thought these things, the dream would appear, and he would sit there numbly.

Mr. JC sometimes stood by his office door to watch Ian. Sometimes he wondered whether the child would realize that the only problem was himself. If he didn't trust himself, how could he

possibly trust his fingers? How could he ever play again? Mr. JC wanted him to play again. He wanted Ian to notice that his parents were never coming back. He wanted the boy to know that it was okay; everything would be okay. It really would, if only he let himself heal and gave up the tragic memory.

"I've not heard you play for a while." Mr. JC said now.

"You told me I should take a break." Ian replied.

"I know, but we both know that's not why you aren't playing. So why don't you tell me the truth?"

"You know the truth."

"Ian, please. You must cooperate. I'm trying to help you."

"If you must know, it's because I'm afraid that it will be a disaster. That it will be just like yesterday. I'm afraid I'll ruin the beauty of every song."

"But you can't know unless you try."

Ian looked up. "Sir, enough of this. How can I play a true kind of music? How do I make my music honest?"

Mr. JC smiled. "I think you must play and decide for yourself."

"Then may I go and play?"

"Of course."

Ian grinned and thanked the headmaster. He swung the door open and took his seat on the piano, and it welcomed him and made itself more comfortable than before. He closed his eyes. He popped his knuckles. He placed his precise fingers against the cool keys. And then he played. But, as before, his music was disagreeable. It was disgraceful to the beautiful piano which he played on. He dropped his hands to his lap and clasped them together to prevent the shakiness. He hung his head in disdain. Ian looked as though he were in prayer, and perhaps truly he was.

"Ian?" a small, quiet voice said.

"Hello, William." Ian replied without moving.

"What's wrong?" William climbed onto the bench beside the other boy.

"I can't play anymore."

"Why not?"

"I don't know, William."

"Can I play?"

Ian looked at him. "The piano?"

"Yes."

"Do you know how to play already?"

"No. But you can teach me, can't you?"

Ian smiled. "Yes, William, I can."

And he did. He taught the younger boy the basics of piano. He showed him where middle c was, what a and b and c and d and e and f and g looked like. He taught the other boy how to recognize the notes with ease. Of course, he explained treble clef and bass clef. He showed him where the sharps and flats were and explained what they were for. Ian taught him to keep count and told him about the different time signatures. He told William nearly everything he knew about piano, and he was glad to do it.

"Can I play now?" William asked.

"Anything you like."

William's small fingers fell on the keys, and he played, though he kept his eyes open. The first few times there were mistakes and pauses. There was once when William removed his hands entirely and thought for a moment. But after the initial unease and unsureness, he played a short song without any mistakes. He looked up at his teacher with a bright smile.

"That's very good, William." Ian appraised.

"Will you play a song for me?" William inquired.

Ian's smile vanished. "No, I won't."

"But you haven't played at all. You've barely touched the piano. What happened?"

"I let myself forget the reason for playing and now I can't rediscover that reason."

"Ian, that is your problem. You don't need to rediscover the old reason. You must ascertain a new reason to play."

Ian looked around and his gaze landed on Mr. JC. "You make it sound so simple, sir."

"Only because it is."

"And what, dare I ask, is that new reason?"

"Only you can know that. But honesty isn't bad."

Ian sighed and turned away, automatically resting his hands on the piano. "Except that I can't seem to find any."

Mr. JC took William's place by Ian. "Can't find any what?"

"Reason, honesty, truth, faith, trust, I don't know. I can't find

any anything."

"Play a song for me, Ian."

"What if I don't want to?"

"Please."

"No. I can't."

"Yes, you can."

"No, sir. Really, I can't."

"If you press those keys right now, you'll be able to play, Ian."

"I can't!" Ian slammed the piano closed.

But he hadn't taken his other hand off the keyboard. When the lid came crashing down, it came crashing down on his hand. He gasped and pulled it away. He glanced at the line that the edge of the lid had indented into the back of his hand. He felt it throb and he felt the heat of pain.

"Are you all right?" Mr. JC asked.

"No, I'm not! My parents are *dead*! I've been playing piano since the day I turned five, and now I can't anymore! Gracie is gone! Vivi and Edward are gone. I can't teach piano without playing. My hand hurts. My music is falling to pieces. I'm falling to pieces. I'm not all right, sir."

"Ian, play a song for me."

"How?"

"The way you always do. Play the honest kind of music that's inside of you. Play it for me." Mr. JC lifted the piano lid and gently placed the boy's hands on the ivory keys. "Play something compassionate and true."

Ian's fingers pressed down, and they played. The music was different than his other songs. And it wasn't a mess. It was graceful and gentle and flowing and beautiful. The effortless kind of beauty that had always come to him so simply. This song of his was lovely. And this song of his was true and honest. With his eyes lightly closed and body swaying with the rhythm, Ian Hain smiled and let his fingers do the flawless work. He didn't notice it then, or for a long time, but that time when he played, his hand healed. It wasn't easy to understand, the way or the reason, but if you ask me, it was Mr. JC's doing. If you ask me, there was much more to Mr. JC than you might have realized.

"That's the way to play, dear boy. That's the honesty of faith

put into simple music.”

“I owe a great deal to you, Mr. JC. And I owe you an apology. I’m sorry I didn’t believe you. I should’ve trusted you. Forgive me.”

“Always, Ian. Always.”

He continued to play. William watched and listened and dreamed. Ian smiled to himself the entire time. He hadn’t played such a splendid song for a very long time. He didn’t usually give names to his songs, to his wonderful art. But this song was different. This song was the song that nearly healed him. That gave him a new reason. This song was called *An Honest Kind of Music*. And it made him glad.

Then the doors creaked open and two people came into the orphanage. They both had brown hair and green eyes. They both looked around the room. And both their gazes froze on William. Both their eyes grew tearful, and both their faces shone with smiles.

The woman spoke first. “William?”

William stared at the couple. “Yes...?”

“My William, my dear boy.” The woman wrapped her arms around the stunned child, crying only for joy. The man enclosed both child and woman in his huge embrace and that was when the truth dawned on both boys.

These people’s names were Logan and Alice Roe. Eight years ago, they had been very poor and unable to provide for their baby. They had given him to Mr. JC. And now, all these years later, here they were. And they were ready for their son. They were here for him. They were here to take him home.

“Willam, I’m so sorry. I... I couldn’t do it. That day, when I brought you here, I thought I wouldn’t see you again. I thought I would lose the house. I thought I was saying goodbye. But now we have enough of everything. We want to take you home.” Alice explained.

William looked at Ian for a brief moment. “Really?”

She laughed through tears. “Yes, really.”

William smiled too, and he looked so happy. Then he went to Ian, and he sat with him on the bench. “I’m going home, Ian. Home with my own mother and father.”

Ian forced himself to smile. “I know, William.”

“Should I go?”

“Of course you should! That’s your mother and father waiting to

take their only son home. They love you, William. Yes, without a doubt, you should go with them."

"Then what will you do?"

Ian swallowed. "What I do should be no concern of yours."

"But it is. It's my only concern."

"I'll be happy, William. I'll play piano and laugh with Mr. JC."

"Will you be okay?"

"Yes, of course. Go with them, William. Go home."

The younger boy hugged Ian and whispered goodbye. William followed his mother and his father out the door, but he glanced back at Ian on his way out with a sad expression. Ian waved. He didn't know that when the doors closed, it would be the last time he ever saw anyone except Mr. JC. He didn't know that when the doors closed, it would be the last time he would see the doors open. He couldn't possibly know that when the doors closed, it would hurt him in a way he hadn't been hurt before. Ian didn't know that when those doors closed, he would be healed. He would be still. And then William was gone, and the doors closed.

Ian turned back to his beautiful transparent piano and his fingers played elegantly and wonderfully. His fingers played the prettiest and the saddest song Ian had ever heard them play. They played something like a waltz and a tearfully dramatic song. They played it for a long time. But when the song was finished, they did not continue to play. Ian's fingers sensed the sudden delicacy in the room. The moment they ceased to play, one single drop sparkled on the back of Ian's hand. Then they shook, and more glistening drops fell onto them. Ian's eyes were closed, and his body was relaxed. But that didn't mean his heart was relaxed. His tears tumbled down his cheeks. They didn't cascade as he once thought they would. They fell slowly and silently and gracefully. The tears were much like one of his songs, lovely and gentle and slow and sad. But if this was a song, it was the saddest song he had ever composed. Ian's hands covered his face, and he sank to his knees on the floor. If this was one of his songs, it was the quietest song he had ever composed. The tears weren't loud, but they were many. They made a sparkling puddle in his lap. And if indeed this was one of his songs, it was the most honest song he had ever composed in all his life.

Mr. JC knelt beside him, but he didn't embrace him. He did not

lift Ian into his arms to comfort him. He didn't speak words of consolation or reassurance. Mr. JC put one careful and kind hand on the child's shoulder and cried his own kind of tears. Ian didn't understand it at that moment, but this man was not crying *with* him. This man was crying *for* him.

It was a very long time before Ian's greatest and truest song ended. It was a long time before he looked up at the man beside him and cried again. It was a very long time before he felt able to speak. It was a long time before he moved away from the shimmering puddle of honesty he had cried. And it was a long, long time before he found himself at the piano bench again.

Ian's hands rested on the ivory keys, and he looked at the scintillating man beside him. "Thank you."

That man smiled brightly and put a hand on the boy's head. "'Be still, and know that I *am* God.' Psalm 46:10."

In that moment, Ian was still. He didn't breathe, and he didn't open his eyes. His heart didn't beat, and his fingers didn't move. His body didn't sway, and his foot didn't press the pedal. But the mirth was still there in his eyes. The gladness was still there in his smile. And in spirit, Ian's fingers moved across that comely keyboard as always they had. In spirit, he played songs with the lovely and graceful and wonderful and beautiful effortlessness that they always had. When his body became still, his spirit never stopped playing. His spirit never grew tired or sad or old. Ian was still, and his elegantly dramatic music was there in his spirit forevermore.

THE END



An orphan boy, a piano, and a man.

Ian Hain is a troubled orphan boy who finds comfort only when he plays the piano. The orphans that live with him leave him alone one by one. There are only two things that stay with the boy, and they are Mr. JC and the piano. The man and the music. But then Ian can no longer play. His fingers turn against him. He's left alone without any comfort. Except for Mr. JC. Mr. JC is always, always, there for everyone.